

# **BULGARIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and conscience for believers and nonbelievers, regardless of denomination, and states all religious practice shall be unrestricted. The law allows individuals to practice their religion freely as long as the religious group is granted registration by the Sofia city court. The exception is Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which the constitution designates as the country's "traditional" religion, exempting the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) from the registration requirement. A district court in March found 13 Muslim leaders guilty of spreading pro-sharia ideology and hatred of other religious groups. Security forces detained approximately 26 Muslims in November for propagating anti-democratic ideology and incitement to war. Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses reported continued harassment by the security services and local police. Some minority religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to report discrimination and prejudice from local authorities in certain municipalities, despite obtaining national registration. Schools banned the wearing of the hijab and local governments continued to deny requests to construct new mosques. Jewish organizations expressed concern over hate speech and commemoration of World War II figures associated with Nazism.

In February protesters opposed to a pending restitution claim by the Muslim community attacked the central mosque in Plovdiv, resulting in injuries and arrests. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses reported physical assaults targeting members of their communities. The Jewish community, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other small religious groups reported nationalist parties increased their anti-minority rhetoric and minority harassment during election campaigns. Muslims, Jews, and Jehovah's Witnesses reported incidents of vandalism against their places of worship. The municipality of Sofia convened the first ever "Festival of Religions" to promote interfaith tolerance.

The U.S. embassy regularly discussed discrimination cases and the construction of new places of worship with government officials. The Ambassador advocated for tolerance, met with religious leaders, and participated in the Festival of Religions to promote religious dialogue. Embassy officers discussed infringements on religious freedom with minority religious groups, especially the Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, evangelical, and Jehovah's Witness communities.

## **BULGARIA**

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 6.9 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 76 percent of the population identifies itself as Orthodox Christian. Muslims are the second-largest religious group, estimated at 10 percent of the population. Groups that together constitute about 2 percent of the population include evangelical Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Armenian Christians, Jews, Mormons, and others. Nearly 5 percent of respondents said they had no religion and over 7 percent did not identify with any of the above faiths.

Some religious minorities are concentrated geographically. Many Muslims, including ethnic Turks, Roma, and "Pomaks" (descendants of Slavic Bulgarians who converted to Islam under Ottoman rule) live in the Rhodope Mountains along the southern border with Greece and Turkey. Ethnic Turkish and Roma Muslims also live in large numbers in the northeast and along the Black Sea coast. Nearly 40 percent of Catholics live in and around Plovdiv. The majority of the small Jewish community lives in Sofia, Plovdiv, and along the Black Sea coast. Protestants are widely dispersed but are more numerous in areas with large Roma populations. Approximately 80 percent of the urban population identifies as Orthodox Christian, while 62 percent of the rural population identifies as Orthodox Christian. Approximately 25 percent of the rural population identifies as Muslim, compared with 4 percent of the urban population.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and conscience, providing protection from discrimination and supporting tolerance and respect for believers and nonbelievers, regardless of denomination. It states all religious practices shall be unrestricted and religious beliefs, institutions, and communities cannot be used for political ends. The constitution also stipulates the separation of church and state and prohibits the formation of political parties along religious lines. The law defines private religious observance as situations where only members of the religious group are present, and public religious observances as situations where observances are also open to persons who do not belong to the sponsoring group. The law does not allow any privilege based on religious identity.

## BULGARIA

The constitution names Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the country's traditional religion. The law establishes the BOC as a legal entity, exempting it from the court registration that is mandatory for all other religious groups wishing to acquire national legal recognition. The law designates the Metropolitan of Sofia as the BOC's patriarch.

To receive national legal recognition, the law requires groups other than the BOC to apply for official registration with the Sofia City court. Applications must include: the group's name and official address; a description of the group's religious beliefs and service practices; organizational structure and bodies; management procedures, bodies, and mandates; official representatives and the processes for their election; procedures for convening meetings and making decisions; finances and property; and processes for termination and liquidation. The Directorate for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers provides expert opinions on registration matters upon request of the court. Applicants have the right to appeal negative registration decisions to the court of appeals. The law does not require the formal registration of local branches of registered groups, only that the branches notify local authorities of the national registration of their group.

The law requires the government to provide funding for all registered religious groups. Registered groups have the right to perform religious services, own assets such as houses of worship and cemeteries, provide medical, social, and educational activities, and be participants in commercial ventures. Unregistered groups operate outside the law and are subject to a fine of between 100 and 300 leva (\$62 to \$186) for a first offense and between 500 and 1,000 leva (\$311 to \$622) for a repeat offense. If the infraction is committed by a legal entity, the fine can range from 500 to 5,000 leva (\$311 to \$3,108). There are 132 registered religious groups in addition to the BOC.

The law allows registered groups to publish religious media and distribute religious literature, and it does not restrict proselytizing. Some municipal ordinances, however, require local permits for distribution of religious literature in public places, and some municipalities have adopted local regulations that restrict proselytizing.

By law, public schools at all levels are required to offer an optional religious education course that covers Christianity and Islam as part of the elective curriculum. The course examines the historical, philosophical, and cultural aspects of religion and introduces students to the moral values of different religious

## **BULGARIA**

groups. All officially registered religious groups can request that their religious beliefs be included in the course's curriculum. The law also allows religious groups to open religious schools and universities. Education in religious schools is required to meet government standards for secular education.

The penal code provides for up to four years imprisonment and a fine of 5,000 to 10,000 leva (\$3,108 to \$6,215) for propagating hatred on religious grounds by means of mass and electronic information systems; up to three years imprisonment and a fine of 3,000 to 10,000 leva (\$1,865-\$6,215) for religious desecration, including the destruction or damage of religious buildings, places of prayer, symbols, or gravestones; and up to one year imprisonment for obstructing the ability of individuals to profess their faith or carry out their rituals and services or for compelling another to participate in religious rituals and services. In addition, the code provides up to three years imprisonment for forming "a political organization on religious grounds" or using a church or religion to spread propaganda against the authority of the state or its activities; and up to three years in prison and a fine of 5,000 leva (\$3,108) for spreading "fascist or another antidemocratic ideology" or for replacing public and governmental order by force.

An independent ombudsman established by law serves as an advocate for citizens who believe their rights and freedoms have been violated by the actions or inaction of public and municipal administrations, as well as by public service providers. The ombudsman can request information from authorities, act as an intermediary in resolving disputes, make proposals for terminating existing practices, refer information to the prosecution service, and request the Constitutional Court to abolish legal provisions as unconstitutional.

### **Government Practices**

A district court in March found 13 Muslim leaders guilty of spreading pro-sharia ideology and hatred of other religious groups, and in November security forces detained 26 Muslims on charges of propagating anti-democratic ideology and incitement to war. As of the end of the year, seven remained in custody. Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses reported continued harassment by the security services and local police, and some minority religious groups continued to report local authorities in certain municipalities discriminated against them, despite their national registration status. Schools banned wearing the hijab and local governments continued to deny requests to construct new mosques. Jewish

## BULGARIA

organizations expressed concern over hate speech and the commemoration of World War II figures associated with Nazism.

In March the Pazardjik District Court found 13 Muslim leaders guilty of participating in an organization not legally registered in Bulgaria that aimed to preach Salafi Islam, which the court determined was an “anti-democratic ideology” because it opposed the principles of democracy, division of powers, liberalism, statehood, rule of law, basic human rights, and religious freedom. One of the defendants, Ahmed Mussa, received one year in prison (but will serve four years accumulated from a prior suspended sentence) and a fine of 5,000 leva (\$3,108); two others received suspended sentences of 12 months and 10 months, respectively and a fine of 3,000 leva (\$1,865) each; the remaining 10 received fines of 5,000 leva (\$3,108). Human rights activists stated the trial had focused on theological, rather than criminal issues and said the prosecution had failed to prove any of the charges. The prosecution said the trial served as an effective deterrent against the spread of radical Islam. The grand mufti’s office said the charges and the sentences were “unacceptable” and the trial would increase mistrust between Muslims and the rest of the population. Both the prosecution and the defendants appealed the trial court decision. As of the end of the year, the first appeal hearing was pending at the Plovdiv Appellate Court.

On November 25, security forces detained approximately 26 Muslims, including Imam Ahmed Mussa, and seized books and computers during a raid on over 40 homes and a mosque. Security forces held those detained for 24 hours, and charged Mussa and six others with propagating anti-democratic ideology and incitement to war. They reported they found Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) paraphernalia, including flags, shirts, and banners, while searching the homes and mosque, and accused Mussa and the group of assisting foreign fighters. As of the end of the year, the seven remained in custody.

As of November the prosecution had not submitted an indictment against the participants in the 2012 assault organized by the extreme nationalist party Ataka on Muslims attending Friday prayer in front of the Sofia mosque. In May the government had presented its position on the case to the European Court of Human Rights, stating that while the protestors had acted in a morally and ethically reproachful way, their actions did not violate human rights.

Many Muslim leaders continued to report harassment by the security services, saying the national security services brought in members of the Muslim

## BULGARIA

community for questioning as a form of intimidation and to create conflict within the community.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported harassment from the local police in Razgrad, Shumen, and Kyustendil, who, they said, told members of the community who were proselytizing that they were in violation of the law and threatened them with "problems."

Some minority religious groups, including Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to report discrimination and prejudice from local authorities in certain municipalities, despite obtaining national registration from the Sofia city court. Contrary to the law, some municipalities such as Lovech and Kyustendil had ordinances requiring the groups also to register locally.

The government recognized Orthodox Christianity, Hanafi Sunni Islam, Judaism, and Roman Catholicism as holding a historic place in the country's culture.

During the year, Jehovah's Witnesses informed the ombudsman of two complaints the community had made against local authorities. The first was made on January 13 to the chief of police in Shumen regarding police harassment and the second on February 27 to the regional governor of Kyustendil regarding the Kyustendil municipal council's February approval of ordinances against proselytizing. The Shumen chief of police subsequently met with local Jehovah's Witnesses representatives and offered cooperation on preventing future incidents. As of the end of the year, the Jehovah's Witnesses had not received an answer to their second complaint.

In March the municipal council in Karlovo (Plovdiv Region) also approved amendments prohibiting door-to-door proselytizing and the distribution of religious literature. Despite protests by the Directorate for Religious Affairs against the restrictions, the regional governors of Kyustendil and Plovdiv did not stop the implementation of the amendments.

The government did not permit religious headaddresses in official photos for national identity documents. The education ministry and most schools interpreted the law denying privileges based on religious identity to ban the display of "religious symbols," including wearing the hijab, in public schools. In September the Sofia Administrative Court confirmed the determination of the public Commission for Protection against Discrimination in 2013 that the director of the only public

## BULGARIA

school in Gorno Kraishte had not committed discrimination by banning a student from attending the school for wearing a hijab.

Although the statute of limitations for restitution cases expired in 2013, a number of claims from the grand mufti's office remained outstanding. As of November the grand mufti's office reported there were 26 outstanding claims on 28 properties in the country. In April a rival group led by former Grand Mufti Nedim Gendjev challenged the current grand mufti's office's succession claim on the former Muslim religious communities that existed from the 1920s to the 1940s, and all restitution claims were suspended until the challenge could be resolved. On June 16, the Kardjali District Court rejected the grand mufti's office's claim for ownership of the building housing the regional historical museum, ordering the Muslim community to pay 91,062 lev (\$56,595) to the state for court fees. At the end of the year, the grand mufti's office was appealing the case to the Plovdiv Appellate Court.

The local government in Gotse Delchev continued to take no action on the Muslim community's application for a permit to construct a mosque. The Sofia municipal government continued to withhold permission for building a second mosque in Sofia, even though some worshippers could not find space in the existing mosque during Friday and holiday prayers and prayed outside on the sidewalk.

Jewish organizations expressed concern over what they stated was government and judicial passivity in addressing hate crimes, particularly the prosecution's tendency to dismiss hate speech complaints on the grounds of freedom of expression.

Jewish organizations raised concerns over an archaeological conference that took place in December, jointly organized by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and Sofia University honoring former Prime Minister Bogdan Filov. Filov's government implemented pro-Nazi policies and passed an anti-Semitic law in 1941 that restricted the civil and political rights of Jews.

In July the president hosted an iftar for the first time, inviting the leaders of the six religious groups comprising the National Council of Religious Denominations (a nongovernmental organization that works on projects and issues of common interest and promotes religious tolerance): Orthodox Christians, Muslims, evangelicals, Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and Jews. Along with the prime minister, the president also issued a joint statement against hate speech and ethnic intolerance.

## BULGARIA

The state budget allocated 4.5 million leva (\$2.8 million) for registered religious groups. Of the total, 3.21 million leva (\$2 million) were allocated for the BOC; 360,000 leva (\$224,000) for the Muslim community; 50,000 leva (\$31,000) for the Roman Catholic Church; 50,000 leva (\$31,000) for the Armenian Apostolic Church; 50,000 leva (\$31,000) for the Jewish community; 80,000 leva (\$50,000) for other registered denominations; 450,000 leva (\$280,000) for maintenance of religious facilities of national importance; and 50,000 leva (\$31,000) for publication of religious books and research. Another 200,000 leva (\$124,000) will remain in reserve, including 50,000 leva (\$31,000) to create a register of all religious facilities in the country. The “other” registered denominations had to apply to the Directorate for Religious Affairs for funds, but the overall amount of funds available was small and not all received approval. Out of 15 applications submitted, three were turned down during the year: the Buddhist Community’s application on the grounds the group had received multiple previous subsidies; God’s Church in Sofia’s application because it was filed after all available funds were allocated; and the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ application due to complaints stating the denomination had violated the law by working with minors.

The country is an observer at the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Anti-Muslim demonstrators attacked the central mosque in Plovdiv to protest possible restitution of a mosque in Karlovo, resulting in injuries and arrests. Mormons reported instances of harassment of missionaries, including physical assaults. The Jewish community, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other small religious groups reported that nationalist parties increased their anti-minority rhetoric and harassment during election campaigns. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, and Muslims reported acts of vandalism against religious properties. The first ever Festival of Religions to promote tolerance was held in September in Sofia.

On February 14, approximately 2,000 anti-Muslim protesters, including soccer fans, members of various nationalist groups from around the country, the mayor of Karlovo, municipal councilors from Karlovo, and an Orthodox priest from Veliko Turnovo, attacked the central mosque in Plovdiv, throwing stones and firecrackers at the mosque. The crowd had originally gathered to protest outside the Plovdiv Appellate Court during a hearing about the restitution claim on the mosque in Karlovo brought by the grand mufti’s office. The police detained approximately



## BULGARIA

120 people during the attack on the mosque, and an officer and several protesters were injured. The court sentenced 11 of the detainees under a fast-track procedure for hooliganism, which allowed authorities to bring the suspects to trial within seven days. The perpetrators were sentenced with fines of 300 and 400 leva (\$186 and \$249), two-day detentions, suspended sentences, and community service.

Mormons reported several instances of harassment and physical assault of missionaries by young men in Burgas, Pleven, Stara Zagora, and Sofia. On June 3, two Mormon missionaries walking toward a church were approached by seven teenage boys. The boys passed the first missionary but one swung and hit the second missionary in the jaw, a second spat in his face, and a third threw a soda can at the missionaries. No charges were filed by the police in any of the instances.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported threats to their members, including two individuals who were threatened September 20 while proselytizing in Tutrakan by a man carrying a wooden beam.

In February the Shalom Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms protested and called for a ban of the Lukov March to be held on February 15. The march was an annual event organized by the Bulgarian National Union honoring Hristo Lukov, a former general and minister of war who headed the far-right Union of Bulgarian National Legions during World War II. In the past, marchers had carried pro-Nazi and pro-fascist propaganda signs. Sofia municipality officials decided not to issue permission for the march, a decision the media attributed to the organized protest against the event. Despite the prohibition, approximately 300 persons gathered and marched briefly in downtown Sofia under tight security provided by the police, who decided not to take action against the marchers in order to avoid escalation.

The Jewish community, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and other small religious groups reported that nationalist parties increased their anti-minority rhetoric and harassment around the May and October elections. In its election posters, the Ataka party used an image of a fist crushing a bearded man wearing the Star of David, who was represented as a "puppeteer" of the United States and Turkey.

Two extreme nationalist parties, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization and the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria, organized a series of protests in Karlovo, Blagoevgrad, Petrich, Gotse Delchev, and Kyustendil in

## BULGARIA

support of a ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses. Following the protests, Jehovah's Witnesses' prayer houses were vandalized. The mayors of Karlovo and Kyustendil joined in the campaign, stating in the media that the local population will "fight to the last man" in order to prevent such "sects" from "finding a foothold in their cities."

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to say media reports misrepresented their activities and beliefs, in particular reports by the ultranationalist SKAT TV cable company headquartered in Burgas, which accused them of criminal acts and referred to them as "Satanists." The Burgas regional prosecutor turned down the group's hate speech complaint, saying SKAT TV had presented the results of "investigative journalism." On July 22, Jehovah's Witnesses appealed this decision to the district prosecutor, who confirmed the decision of the lower level prosecution office.

Jewish community leaders continued to express concern over increasing incidents of anti-Semitism in social media and online forums. Examples include the posting of old signs stating "Jews No Entry," and comments posted under articles in online news outlets such as "Dirty Jew: Jews and Gypsies have been punished by having no country or homeland; they roam around the world and intrude on other countries; this one is a dirty Jew, but no Jew is okay."

Social media users accused a prominent U.S. citizen of sponsoring the antigovernment ProtestNetwork, which described itself as "a network for coordination and contact" whose goal is "the resignation of the current government through the spread of protest actions." The users also made frequent references to his Jewish heritage.

Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and the grand mufti's office continued to report incidents of desecration. In September vandals spray-painted swastikas and death threats on the mosque in Blagoevgrad. In June a seven-foot cross appeared on the minaret of the old mosque in Gotse Delchev. In July vandals spray painted a satanic symbol on the front door of the Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall in Parvomay.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported other cases of vandalism during the year, particularly in Pleven, Blagoevgrad, Petrich, and Gotse Delchev, involving desecration and broken windows at prayer houses.

## **BULGARIA**

On June 4, the first day of the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, vandals spray-painted a swastika and “Death to Jews” on the information board in front of the Sofia synagogue. The incident was caught on security cameras, and the police arrested four minors in connection with the crime. As of December the police kept the case file open but commented it would not proceed to prosecution considering the age of the perpetrators.

In September the National Council of Religious Denominations, in partnership with Sofia municipality, organized a first ever Festival of Religions which gathered Orthodox Christians, Muslims, evangelicals, Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and Jews together for a day of open doors and sharing of information about each religious group.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The embassy regularly communicated with the Directorate for Religious Affairs, the Ombudsman’s office, and the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination to discuss religious freedom issues such as the Pazardjik trial, discrimination cases, and the construction of new places of worship.

The Ambassador met with the patriarch, the grand mufti, and the High Israelite Spiritual Council to discuss religious freedom issues such as tolerance of different religious communities, the need to counter hate speech, and to continue U.S. engagement with the respective communities. Embassy representatives met frequently with leaders of the Jewish community, the grand mufti’s office, the Mormons, evangelicals, and Jehovah’s Witnesses to discuss infringements on freedom of religion, outreach activities, and proposed changes in legislation.

The Ambassador and embassy representatives attended the Festival of Religions in Sofia in September, during which she met in the grand mufti’s tent with representatives of the Orthodox Church and discussed the history of tolerance in Bulgaria and the need for such events to continue in the future. The Ambassador and embassy representatives also attended the commemoration of the 71st anniversary of the saving of Bulgarian Jews in March and the ceremony marking the International Holocaust Remembrance Day in January.

Embassy representatives visited the regional muftis of Shumen, Razgrad, Pleven, and Veliko Turnovo to learn about local religious relations, property disputes, and the local communities. In July the Ambassador hosted an iftar at her residence

## **BULGARIA**

where she discussed religious freedom and tolerance with the grand mufti, members of the Muslim community, representatives of other religious communities, a journalist, and an official from the foreign affairs ministry.

The Ambassador also published an op-ed piece for the International Day for Tolerance in which she recognized the historically peaceful coexistence of various religions in the country, the country's positive role during the Holocaust, and called on political leaders and ordinary people alike to oppose intolerance and hatred.